



REBBETZIN SHIRA SMILES

FACULTY, OU ISRAEL CENTER

Surviving the Galut

“*Ve’et malchei Midyan hargu al chaleleihem ... ve’et Bilam ben Be’or hargu be’charev* — And they killed the Midianite kings upon their slain... and Bilam the son of Beor they slew with the sword.” (*Bamidbar* 31:8) Why is it important to know how Bilam was killed? How is that relevant to us?

Rashi expounds: Bilam exchanged the accepted mode of warfare, i.e. the sword, with the power of speech to curse the Jewish people. Likewise here, *Am Yisrael* exchanged their traditional mode of combat, i.e. tefillah, and killed Bilam by sword. Indeed, earlier in the *parashah* we find that the Midrash teaches that each tribe sent three thousand men to fight against Midyan. One thousand men went to battle, one thousand men kept watch over their possessions, and one thousand men prayed for salvation. The Chafetz Chaim *zt”l* sees a powerful lesson here; our

main arsenal lies in our power of speech. A Jew has the power to facilitate spiritual realities with words of *kedushah*. How careful one must be to use this awesome gift properly, and of course, assiduously avoid words of *lashon hara* and *rechilus*, evil, harmful speech.

Targum Yonatan describes the unusual circumstances of Bilam’s death. When Bilam saw that Pinchas was chasing him, he used sorcery to fly in the air. Following suit, Pinchas uttered the ineffable Name of Hashem and pursued Bilam in the air. As Pinchas drew his sword, Bilam pleaded with him, saying if he’s spared, he would never again harm *Am Yisrael*. To which Pinchas replied, “You are Lavan who tried to destroy Yaakov and you plotted against the Jews in Egypt. You continued your evil campaign and instigated Amalek against us and conspired with Balak to curse us. Finally, you caused further harm by suggesting to Balak the horrible scheme of Ba’al Pe’or in which 24,000 of our people died.” Pinchas then wielded his sword and killed Bilam. Rav Salamon in *Matnat Chaim* understands this exchange as a description of Jewish history. Throughout the centuries, the face of our enemy may have changed, yet their goal is always the same—to destroy and eradicate our people. Rav Solomon strongly believes that it is important to minimize any antagonism by staying under the radar. If we are careful not to arouse the jealousy of those around us, the age-old hatred will hopefully stay quiet.

“*Rav lechem sov et hahar hazeh penu lachem tzafona*—You have circled this mountain long

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enough; turn northward.” (*Devarim 2:3*) The *Kli Yakar* echoes our idea in his interpretation of this verse. The Jews will wander for many years around Edom, in the diaspora. The directive is to turn “*tzafonah*,” which can mean “to hide,” as on Seder night we have “*tzafun*,” hiding the afikomen. The *Kli Yakar* teaches that if a Jew finds success in the *galut*, he should keep it private and not flaunt it. Esav, he continues, still holds bitterness about losing the brachot to Yaakov, the gentiles believe that all the goodness in this world still belong to them. The *Kli Yakar* therefore cautions against inciting jealousy.

This message rings true for us all. Throughout the world, antisemitism has reached new proportions. Let us remember that Bilam lived under many guises but with one evil focus. Until the final *geulah*, if we need to be in the *galut*, we can protect ourselves with a two-pronged approach. Let us be careful how

we publicize our wealth and status and let us increase the use of our greatest weapon—heartfelt, sincere tefillah for the safety and redemption of all Jews, wherever we are. ■



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